

On the Intention of Rousseau

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I

The antiquarian controversy about the intention of Rousseau conceals a political controversy about the nature of democracy. Modern democracy might seem to stand or fall by the claim that “the method of democracy” and “the method of intelligence” are identical. To understand the implications of this claim, one naturally turns to Rousseau, for Rousseau, who considered himself the first theoretician of democracy,¹ regarded the compatibility of democracy, or of free government in general, with science not as a fact which is manifest to everyone but rather as a serious problem.

An adequate understanding of Rousseau’s thesis presupposes a detailed interpretation of the *Contrat social* and *Émile*. For reasons of space alone, to say nothing of others, we must limit ourselves here to a discussion of Rousseau’s “first discourse” which is now conveniently accessible, thanks to George Havens, in a beautiful and well annotated edition.² Rousseau himself said that all his writings express the same principles. There are then no other Rousseauan principles than those underlying his short discourse on the

¹ “La constitution démocratique a jusqu’à présent été mal examinée. *Tous* ceux qui en ont parlé, ou ne la connaissaient pas, ou y prenaient trop peu d’intérêt, ou avaient intérêt de la présenter sous un faux jour.... La constitution démocratique est certainement le chef-d’œuvre de l’art politique; mais plus l’artifice en est admirable, moins il appartient à tous les yeux de le pénétrer” (*Lettres écrites de la Montagne*, VIII, 252, Garnier ed.; the italics are mine).

² Jean-Jacques Rousseau. *Discours sur les sciences et les arts*. [Édition critique avec une introduction et un commentaire par George R. Havens.] New York: Modern Language Association of America. – 1946. pp. xiii & 278 pp. \$3. This work will be cited in the following notes as “Havens”; Rousseau’s first discourse will be referred to as *Discours* and the pages and lines cited will be those of the first edition which are indicated in Havens’ edition.

sciences and arts, however imperfectly he may have expressed them in that earliest of his important writings.³

The specific thesis of the *Discours* is slightly obscured by the immediate purpose for which it was written. It was composed as an answer to the question raised by the Academy of Dijon whether the restoration of the sciences and arts had contributed to moral betterment. Accordingly, what strikes the reader first is the fact that Rousseau had the courage, in the heyday of the Enlightenment, "to blame the sciences and to praise ignorance" in the interest of morality. Yet the denial of the harmony between civilization and morality is not the specific thesis of Rousseau. It was anticipated by the very question of the Academy of Dijon. It was anticipated above all by a tradition whose most famous representatives would seem to be Montaigne and Seneca and which can be traced, with some degree of justice, to Socrates.⁴ As a matter of fact, what Rousseau calls Socrates' praise of ignorance occupies an important place in the *Discours*, which quotes *in extenso* a pertinent passage from Plato's *Apology of Socrates*. But one has merely to restore the quotation to its immediate context to realize the most obvious difference between the *Discours* and the tradition to which it is related. Rousseau quotes Socrates' censure of the poets and the "artists"; he fails to quote his censure of the politicians.⁵ Far from being directed against the democratic or republican politicians or statesmen, as was Socrates' "praise of ignorance," Rousseau's "praise of ignorance" is even inspired by a republican or democratic impulse: he attacks the Enlightenment as a pillar of despotism or of absolute monarchy.⁶

Rousseau's view is not unintelligible. That enlightenment is a pillar of absolute monarchy was admitted by the two men who are still popularly considered the greatest defenders of despotism in modern times, Machiavelli and Hobbes. To see this, one has to take into account the fact that Rousseau

³ "J'ai écrit sur divers sujets, mais toujours dans les mêmes principes" (*Lettre à Beaumont*, p. 437, Garnier, ed.; compare *ibid.*, p. 457). See also Rousseau's letter to Malesherbes of January 12, 1762 (Havens, p. 5). Havens rightly says: "Le premier *Discours* [de Rousseau] est la pierre angulaire de toute son œuvre." As to Rousseau's own judgment on the *Discours*, see *Discours*, "Avertissement," and Havens, 169, note 24.

⁴ *Discours*, 1-2; 13, 8-14, 5; 30, 10-12; Havens, pp. 25, 64-71, and 167. Also compare *Discours*, 47, 9-15, with Xenophon's *Oeconomicus*, 4.2-3 and 6.5ff., and *Discours*, 57, 16-19 (the idea of a comparison of agriculture and philosophy) with the subject of the *Oeconomicus* as a whole. Regarding the general thesis of the *Discours*, compare Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*, I 2.6, *Resp. Lac.*, 2, and *Memorabilia*, IV 7.

⁵ Compare *Discours*, 22, 12-24, 9, with *Apology of Socrates*, 21 b ff. Socrates speaks not of artists but of artisans. The change from "artisans" to "artists" may also be due to Rousseau's democratic intention; it is at any rate in agreement with that intention.

⁶ *Discours*, 6, 6-27; 16, 21ff.; 21, 1; 28; 54, 18-21 (compare with *Contrat social*, I 6). See also some later statements by Rousseau on the purport of the *Discours* (Havens, pp. 5, 53, and 172) as well as Diderot's and d'Argenson's comments (Havens, pp. 31 and 33). That Rousseau's praise of Louis XIV in the *Discours* (55, 15-17) is of doubtful sincerity is apparent from a moment's consideration of an earlier passage (*ibid.*, 28, 11-22).

regards the Enlightenment, which he attacks in the *Discours*, as essentially hostile to religion⁷ and thus by considering the Enlightenment a pillar of despotism he implies that despotism, as distinguished from free government, can dispense with religion. Now, Machiavelli had intimated that whereas free commonwealths absolutely require religion as perhaps their strongest bond, the fear of God can be replaced by the fear of an able prince, and he had described, in the same context, the age of the good Roman emperors, and not the republican period of Rome, as the golden age when everyone could hold and defend any opinion he pleased.⁸ As for Hobbes, whose political demands find their complete fulfillment only in absolute hereditary monarchy, he had taught that the civil order rests on fear of violent death as distinguished from fear of "Powers Invisible," that is, religion. Since the fear of invisible powers naturally endangers the effectiveness of the fear of violent death, the whole scheme suggested by Hobbes requires for its operation the weakening, if not the elimination, of the former kind of fear; it requires such a radical change of outlook as can be brought about only by the diffusion of scientific knowledge. The absolute monarchy favored by Hobbes beyond any other form of government is possible, strictly speaking, only as enlightened, and enlightening, monarchy.⁹

The ground for Rousseau's attack on despotism was laid by Montesquieu's *De l'esprit des lois* which appeared about a year before the *Discours* was conceived. Montesquieu contrasted fear as the principle of despotism with virtue as the principle of democracy. The virtue in question he characterized as political virtue – that is, patriotism or love of equality – and he explicitly distinguished it from moral virtue; he was compelled, however, implicitly to identify political virtue with moral virtue.¹⁰ Montesquieu found the natural home, as it were, of virtue in classical antiquity, and he contrasted the "small souls" of the subjects of the modern monarchies with the human greatness of the citizens of the classical commonwealths.¹¹ He stressed the opposition between classical political

⁷ *Discours*, 36, 8–37, 4; 59, 6–60, 3; 11, 3–16.

⁸ *Discorsi*, I 10–11 (compare I 55). See also Spinoza, *Tractatus politicus*, VI 40 (separation of religion and state in monarchies) and VIII 46 (need for public religion in aristocracies and, by implication, in democracies).

⁹ *De Cive*, X 18–19; *Leviathan*, chs. 12 (pp. 54–57, Everyman's Library ed.), 14 (p. 73), 29 (p. 175), 30 (pp. 180 and 183), and 31 (end). Compare Ferdinand Tönnies, *Thomas Hobbes*, 3rd ed. (Stuttgart 1925) pp. 53–54, 195, and 273–6. For a present-day discussion see Louis Marlo, "Le droit d'insurrection," in *Les doctrines politiques modernes*, ed. by Boris Mirkine-Guetzévitch (New York, 1947) pp. 111–34. Marlo says: "... [le] progrès de la science ... favorise le coup d'état et détruit matériellement et moralement les forces de résistance" (p. 124).

¹⁰ Compare *Esprit*, Avertissement de l'auteur and V 2, with III 3, III 5, and IV 5. The same ambiguity characterizes the thesis of the *Discours* (compare, for example, 20, 3 ff., with 44, 7 ff.). See Havens, pp. 183 note 72, and 200 note 137.

¹¹ Compare *Esprit*, III 3, III 5, IV 4, and XI 13, with the following passages of the *Discours*: 6, 17–18; 20, 3 ff.; 26, 5 ff.; 29, 1 ff.; 47, 9–49, 3; 51 note.

science, which took its bearings by virtue, and modern political science, which was attempting to find a substitute for virtue in economics.¹² He dwelled on the inseparable connection between the principle of democracy, on the one hand, and the prohibitions against luxury and against the undue freedom and power of women, on the other.¹³ He indicated that the cultivation of superior talent is not a primary need, and perhaps no need at all, for democracies.¹⁴ He questioned “the speculative sciences” and “the speculative life” with a view to the demands of a healthy and vigorous republic.¹⁵

To arrive at the theses of the *Discours*, Rousseau merely had to isolate Montesquieu’s analysis of democracy, or of republics in general, and to make explicit certain points that Montesquieu had left unstated. It is true, he could not do this without deviating from Montesquieu’s teaching as a whole, or without criticizing him.¹⁶ For in spite of all his admiration for the spirit of classical antiquity, Montesquieu oscillated, at least apparently, between the classical republic and the modern (limited) monarchy, or, what is perhaps more precise, between the type of republic represented by classical Rome and that represented by eighteenth-century England.¹⁷ The apparent oscillation was due to his awareness of the problem inherent in “virtue” as a political principle. The demands of virtue are not identical with those of political liberty; in fact, they may be opposed to them. To demand that virtue should rule is likely to be tantamount to demanding a large measure of interference with the private life of the citizens; the demand in question may easily conflict with that indulgence of human whims and weaknesses which Montesquieu seems to have regarded as an integral part of humanity. Observations such as these led him to stipulate that the requirements of virtue be limited by considerations of “prudence” and hence to identify the virtue of the legislator with moderation, which he regarded as a virtue of a lower order. From the point of view of liberty as distinguished from virtue he preferred the English order to that of the classical

¹² “Les politiques grecs, qui vivaient dans le gouvernement populaire, ne reconnaissaient d’autre force qui pût les soutenir que celle de la vertu. Ceux d’aujourd’hui ne nous parlent que de manufactures, de commerce, de finances, de richesses et de luxe même” (*Esprit*, III 3). “Les anciens Politiques parloient sans cesse de mœurs et de vertu; les nôtres ne parlent que de commerce et d’argent” (*Discours*, 38, 12–15).

¹³ *Esprit*, VII. Compare *Discours*, 6 note, on the connection between luxury and monarchy (for the example of Alexander and the Ichthyophagi, compare *Esprit*, XXI 8), and 37, 12–45, 12.

¹⁴ Compare *Esprit*, V 3 (mediocrity of talents) with *Discours*, 53, 6 ff., and *Contrat social*, IV 3 (equality of talents).

¹⁵ *Esprit*, IV 8, XIV 5 and 7, XXIII 21. Compare also the censure of China in the *Discours* (16, 18–17, 18) with *Esprit*, VIII 21.

¹⁶ “Le chevalier Petty a supposé, dans ses calculs, qu’un homme en Angleterre vaut ce qu’on le vendrait à Alger. Cela ne peut être bon que pour l’Angleterre: il y a des pays où un homme ne vaut rien; il y a en a où il vaut moins que rien” (*Esprit*, XXIII 18). “L’un vous dira qu’un homme vaut en telle contrée la somme qu’on le vendroit à Alger; un autre en suivant ce calcul trouvera des pays où un homme ne vaut rien, et d’autres où il vaut moins que rien” (*Discours*, 38, 15–26).

¹⁷ *Esprit*, II 4, V 19, XX 4 and 7; compare VI 3 with XI 6.

republics, and from the point of view of humanity as distinguished from virtue he preferred the commercial republics to the military republics. He was thus led, or led back, to the modern approach, which consisted in trying to find a substitute for virtue in the spirit fostered by trade or even in the feudal notion of honor.¹⁸ Rousseau refused, at least at first, to follow Montesquieu in his return, or his adaptation, to the modern principle. While he thus remained faithful to the cause of virtue, he did not prove to be completely impervious to the critique of virtue that motivated Montesquieu's return to modernity.

At any rate, it is not misleading to say that in the *Discours* Rousseau starts by drawing the most extreme conclusions that a republican could draw from Montesquieu's analysis of republics. He directs his explicit and passionate attack not merely against luxury and against the economic approach of modern politics but likewise against "the sciences and the arts," which, he contends, presuppose luxury and foster it. He attacks especially science or philosophy as incompatible in its origin, its exercise, and its effects with the health of society, patriotism, wisdom or virtue. He is consistent enough to praise the Spartans for not having tolerated in their midst arts and artists, as well as science and scholars, and he even praises the Caliph Omar for having ordered the burning of the books of the library of Alexandria.¹⁹ While contending that science as such is immoral, he considers modern science even more dangerous than pagan science. He does not say whether the particular character of modern science is due to the particular character of its origin; he limits himself to indicating that whereas science is normally preceded by ignorance, modern science was preceded by something worse than ignorance – namely, medieval scholasticism – and to tracing the liberation from scholasticism not to the Reformation but to "the stupid Moslem" (the conquest of Constantinople).²⁰ Realizing the difference between, and the possible opposition of, virtue in the strict sense and political virtue, he occasionally praises, in the spirit of his later attacks on civil society as such, the life of the savages.²¹ The theses of the *Discours* are explicitly based on nothing but historical inductions and philosophical reasoning, that is, on considerations fully accessible to the "natural light." Although Rousseau's attack on the Enlightenment partly agrees with the views of the Biblical tradition and though he occasionally defers to these views, his argument is certainly not based on specifically Biblical beliefs.²² One cannot even

¹⁸ *Esprit*, III 5, XI 4, XIX 5, 9–11, 16, XX 1, XXIX 1 (compare III 4). For a discussion of this problem, see, for example, Burke's letter to Rivarol of June 1, 1791, in *Letters of Edmund Burke, A Selection*, ed. H. J. Laski (Oxford World Classics), pp. 303–04.

¹⁹ *Discours*, 13, 8–14, 5; 17, 2–7; 21, 3–5; 29, 6–11; 32, 7–21; 34, 12–35, 2; 37, 13 ff.; 49, 16–18; 51, 28; 54, 3–18; 60, 15 ff.

²⁰ *Discours*, 4, 7–21; 7, 6–14; 25, 1–5; 37, 18–38, 15; 59, 6 ff. Compare Havens, p. 219note 196.

²¹ *Discours*, 5, 14–6, 27; 19, 15–24; 44, 7 ff. Compare Havens, pp. 9, 49, 54, 181note 62.

²² *Discours*, 3, 4–5; 31, 2–4; 32, 1–4; 44, 2–4; Havens, pp. 85, 173 note33, and 177note48. See also the passages indicated in note 7 of this article. Compare the end of note 1 of the *Discours sur l'origine de l'inégalité*. That Rousseau never changed his mind in this respect is apparent,

say that it is based on natural theology. Rousseau introduces one of his most important authorities almost explicitly as a polytheist and he implies that the state of innocence is characterized by polytheism.²³ When he attacks science on the grounds of its detrimental effect on religion, he has in mind “civil religion,” that is, religion considered merely as a social bond.

II

The contemporary critics of Rousseau’s “praise of ignorance” were quite understandably under the impression that he had denied all value to science or philosophy and that he had suggested the abolition of all learning. In his rejoinders, however, he declared that they had not understood him and that he considered preposterous the views that were generally attributed to him. Yet, since he had said the things which he practically denied having said, one seems forced to conclude that he had not meant them. According to the editor of the *Discours*, Rousseau had meant only that science must not be preferred to, or made independent of, morality. But, he adds, Rousseau was so carried away by his enthusiasm for virtue or by his rhetorical power as to exaggerate grossly, to maintain a “somewhat puerile thesis” and unconsciously to contradict himself.²⁴ This interpretation might seem to be borne out by the *Discours* itself. Especially toward its end, Rousseau explicitly admits the compatibility of science and virtue. He bestows high praise upon the learned societies whose members must combine learning and morality; he calls Bacon, Descartes, and Newton the teachers of the human race; he demands that scholars of the first rank should find honorable asylum at the courts of princes in order to enlighten the peoples from there and thus contribute to the peoples’ happiness.²⁵

not only from the general statement quoted before (note 3 of this article), but above all from what one may call his last word on the subject. In his *Rêveries d’un promeneur solitaire* he says: “Dans le petit nombres de livres que je lis quelquefois encore, Plutarque [that is, not the Bible] est celui qui m’attache et me profite le plus” (IV, at the beginning). Compare the statement with *Rêveries*, III.

²³ Compare 44, 7 ff. with 26, 11 (the beginning of the prosopopoeia of Fabricius, that is, of the core of the whole *Discours*). Compare Archbishop Beaumont’s *Mandement*, § 7 beginning.

²⁴ Havens, pp. 36, 38, 46, 52, 58, 59, 64, 80, 87, 88, 176 note 45, 179 note 54, 239 note 259, 248 note 298.

²⁵ *Discours*, 55, 4–56, 22; 62, 15–16; 64, 3–65, 6; 24, 10–25, 2. Compare especially 66, 3–12, with the parallels in the “profession de foi du vicaire Savoyard.” Compare Havens’ notes on these passages, as well as Havens, pp. 32–3 and 173 note 35 on the favorable reception of the *Discours* by the *philosophes*. The apparent concessions to the common view seem to be retracted, at least partly, in the final paragraphs (65, 8 ff.). Yet these very paragraphs seem destined to explain why Rousseau had stressed throughout the *Discours* the incompatibility of science and virtue, for by limiting his final suggestion to “the present state of things,” he seems to indicate that the general thesis of the *Discours* is valid only so long as society is not radically reformed: only in a corrupt society are science and virtue incompatible. See, however, note 40 below.

The view of Rousseau's intention that Havens adopts – a view that led, and leads, directly to Kant's assertion of the primacy of practical reason – is exposed to a difficulty that I consider insuperable. It is a view suggested by one of the men who attacked the *Discours* shortly after its publication.²⁶ But Rousseau declared about ten years later than none of those who had attacked him had ever succeeded in understanding his crucial thesis.

It cannot be denied that Rousseau contradicts himself. The contradiction confronts us, as it were, on the title page. The title is followed by a motto from Ovid, whose name is added to the motto, and who is condemned in the text of the *Discours* as one of those “obscene authors whose very names alarm chastity.”²⁷ To solve the difficulty in a manner that does not do injustice to Rousseau's intelligence or literary ability, one is tempted to suggest that he entrusted the two contradictory theses – the thesis favorable to the sciences and the thesis unfavorable to them – to two different characters, or that he speaks in the *Discours* in two different characters. This suggestion is not so fanciful as it might appear at first sight. In the concluding paragraphs Rousseau describes himself as a “simple soul” or a “common man” (*homme vulgaire*) who as such is not concerned with the immortality of literary fame; but in the preface he gives us clearly to understand that he intends to live, as a writer, beyond his century.²⁸ He draws a distinction between himself who knows nothing and, being neither a true scholar nor a *bel esprit*, is only a common man, and those who teach mankind salutary truths; yet he knows that as the author of the *Discours* (which teaches the salutary truth that the sciences are dangerous) he cannot help also belonging to the second type, that is, to the philosophers or the scientists.²⁹ Just as the *Discours* may be said to have two different authors, it may be said to be addressed to two different audiences. In the concluding section Rousseau makes it clear that in his capacity as a common man he addresses common men. Yet in the preface he states that he writes only for those who are not subjugated by the opinions of their century, of their country, or of their society, that is, only for true scholars; in other words, he states that the *Discours* is addressed not to “the people” or “the public” but only to “a few readers.”³⁰ I suggest, then, that when Rousseau rejects science as superfluous or harmful, he speaks in the character of a common man addressing common men, and when speaking in that character he does not exaggerate at all by rejecting science absolutely. But far from being a common man, he is a philosopher who merely appears in the guise of a common man: as a philosopher addressing philosophers he naturally takes the side of science.

²⁶ Havens, p. 239note 259. See also Havens, pp. 40–1: Havens asserts, and Rousseau denies, that a certain critic of the *Discours* has “saisi l'état de la question.”

²⁷ *Discours*, I, 5, 13–15.

²⁸ *Discours*, II, 14–16 and 65, 8 ff. It is hardly an accident that that section of the *Discours* which Rousseau wrote immediately after the conception of the work was a prosopopoeia.

²⁹ *Discours*, I, 1–11; I, 7–9; 56, 11–22; 64, 19; 65, 8 ff. Compare Havens, p. 201 note 142.

³⁰ Compare *Discours*, I, 14–11, 16, with 2, 1–5. See Havens, p. 56.

It can be proved that this is the correct interpretation of the *Discours* and therewith fundamentally of Rousseau's thought. In defending the *Discours* against the same critic who may have originated the accepted view of his intention, Rousseau explains the frontispiece of the *Discours* as follows: "The torch of Prometheus is the torch of the sciences which is made for the purpose of inspiring the great minds ... the satyr who sees the fire for the first time, runs toward it and wishes to embrace it, represents the common men who, seduced by the lustre of the letters, give themselves indiscreetly to studies. The Prometheus who shouts and warns them of the danger is the citizen of Geneva. This allegory is just, beautiful and, I venture to believe, sublime. What shall one think of a writer who has pondered over it and has not succeeded in understanding it?"³¹ Rousseau who warns the common men of the dangers of science is so far from considering himself a common man that he boldly compares himself to Prometheus who brings the light of science, of the love of science, to the few for whom alone it is destined.

About ten years later Rousseau declares in his *Lettre à M. de Beaumont*: "the development of enlightenment and vice always takes place in the same ratio, not in the individuals, but in the peoples – a distinction which I have always carefully made and which none of those who have attacked me has ever been able to understand."³² Science is not compatible with the virtue of "the peoples"; it is compatible with the virtue of certain individuals, that is, of "the great minds." Science is bad, not absolutely, but only for the people or for society; it is good, and even necessary, for the few among whom Rousseau counts himself. For, as he says in the *Discours*, the mind has its needs as well as the body; but whereas the needs of the body are the foundations of society, the needs of the mind lead to what is merely an ornament of society; the satisfaction of the needs of the mind is not the one thing needful for society and is for this very reason bad for society;³³ but what is not a necessity for, and hence a danger to, society is a necessity for certain individuals. Since the needs of the body are "the need" par excellence, Rousseau can also say that society is based on "need,"³⁴ whereas science is not, and he can therefore imply that science, being radically "free," is of higher dignity than society. As he put it when defending the *Discours* against its critics, "science is not made for man," "for us," "for man in general"; it is good only for certain individuals, for the small number of true scholars, for "heavenly intelligences." One cannot help being reminded of Aristotle's praise of the philosophic life which is the only free life

³¹ Compare Havens, pp. 227 note 224 and 247 note 297.

³² "... Ces réflexions me conduisirent à de nouvelles recherches sur l'esprit humain considéré dans l'état civil; et je trouvai qu'alors le développement des lumières et des vices se faisait toujours en même raison, non dans les individus, mais dans les peuples: distinction que j'ai toujours soigneusement faite, et qu'aucun de ceux qui m'ont attaqué n'a jamais pu concevoir" (*Lettre à Beaumont*, p. 471, Garnier ed.).

³³ *Discours*, 5, 14–6, 6; 33, 3–9; 34, 15–35, 6. Compare *Lettre à d'Alembert*, p. 121, Fontaine ed.

³⁴ *Discours*, 6, 6–8.

and essentially transsocial and of which man is capable not qua mere man but qua partaking of the divine.³⁵ It is only to the few who are capable of a life devoted to science that Rousseau seriously wishes to address himself, not only in the *Discours*, but in all his writings with the possible exception of the merely apologetic ones.³⁶

The view set forth in the preceding paragraph is confirmed by the *Discours*, although rather by seemingly incidental remarks than by the guiding theses.³⁷ In fact, one of these theses appears to contradict our interpretation, for Rousseau seems to contend in the last section of the *Discours* that science is compatible with society. Actually, however, he does not go beyond saying that the study of science by the very few who are by nature destined for it may be permissible from the point of view of society and even salutary, provided they use their natural gifts for enlightening the people about its duties; and what he manifestly does in the *Discours* is not more than precisely this, namely, enlightening the people about its duties. He does not endorse, he even rejects, the suggestion that the philosopher should make accessible to the people the philosophic or scientific knowledge itself: science is permissible or salutary only in so far as it is not, as such, a social factor. Its social effect is necessarily disastrous: enlightenment paves the way for despotism. Accordingly Rousseau repeatedly and most emphatically attacks popularized science or the diffusion

³⁵ *Discours*, 62, 12–14 and 63, 3–10. See Havens, pp. 36, 37, 45, 52, 53, and 60. Compare Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1177 a32 ff. and b26–31, and *Metaphysics*, 982 b25–983 a11.

³⁶ “Tout ceci est vrai, surtout des livres qui ne sont point écrits pour le peuple, tels qu’ont toujours été les miens ... [Quant à *L’Émile*] il s’agit d’un nouveau système d’éducation, dont j’offre le plan à l’examen des sages, et non pas d’une méthode pour les pères et les mères, à laquelle je n’ai jamais songé. Si quelquefois, *par une figure assez commune*, je *parais* leur adresser la parole, c’est, ou pour me faire mieux entendre, ou *pour m’exprimer en moins de mots*” (*Lettres écrites de la Montagne*, V, p. 202, Garnier ed.). See on the other hand *ibid.*, IX, p. 283: “Si je parlais à vous seul, je pourrais user de cette méthode; mais le sujet de ces *Lettres* intéresse un peuple entier.” The *Letters* happen to be an apologetic work. See also *ibid.*, III, pp. 152–53, the distinction between the “hommes sages qui sont instruits et qui savent raisonner” and who alone can have “une foi solide et sûre,” on the one hand, with “les gens bons et droits qui voient la vérité partout où ils voient la justice” and who are apt to be deceived by their zeal, as well as “le peuple” “en toute chose esclave de ses sens,” on the other.

In the preface to his *Lettre à d’Alembert*, Rousseau makes the following remark which is important for the understanding of the *Discours* in particular: “il ne s’agit *plus* ici d’un vain babil de philosophie, mais d’une vérité de pratique importante à tout un peuple. Il ne s’agit *plus* de parler au petit nombre, mais au public; *ni de faire penser les autres, mais d’expliquer nettement mes pensées. Il a donc fallu changer de style*: pour me faire mieux entendre à tout le monde, j’ai dit moins de choses en plus de mots ...” (Italics in quoted passages are mine.)

³⁷ “The peoples” are explicitly addressed (29, 18); Rousseau expresses his respect for true scholars (2, 5) or for the small minority to whom it is appropriate to erect monuments in honor of the human mind (63, 8–10); he indicates that ignorance is despicable (4, 12–13); he speaks of the populace as unworthy to approach the sanctuary of the sciences (62, 1–4). Above all, he quotes Montaigne’s “J’aime à contester et discourir, mais c’est avec peu d’hommes et pour moi” (12 note).

of scientific knowledge.³⁸ There can be no doubt that in rejecting popularized science Rousseau did not exaggerate, but expressed directly and adequately what he seriously thought.

We must add an important qualification. When Rousseau asserts that there is a natural incompatibility between society and science, he understands “natural” in the Aristotelian sense,³⁹ and he means that genuine science is incompatible with a healthy society. In answering one of the critics of the *Discours* he warns the reader against the conclusion “that one should burn all libraries and destroy the universities and academies *today*” (italics mine). In a corrupt society, in a society ruled despotically, science is the only redeeming thing; in such a society, science and society *are* compatible; in such a society the diffusion of scientific knowledge, or, in other words, the open attack on all prejudices is legitimate because social morality cannot become worse than it already is. But Rousseau, who wished to live beyond his time and who foresaw a revolution, wrote with a view to the requirements of a healthy society which might be established after the revolution and which would have to take as its model Sparta rather than Athens. This prospect was bound to influence his own literary activity.⁴⁰

Everyone will admit that in the *Discours* Rousseau attacks the Enlightenment in the interest of society. What is commonly overlooked is the fact that he attacks the Enlightenment in the interest of philosophy or science as well. In fact, since he considers science superior in dignity to society, one must say that he attacks the Enlightenment chiefly in the interest of philosophy. When he attacks the belief that the diffusion of scientific knowledge has a salutary effect on society, he is chiefly concerned with the effect of that belief on science. He

³⁸ *Discours*, II, 6–14; 24, 19–21; 36, 10–37, 11; 59 note; 61, 12–63, 7. “Ne verra-t-on jamais renaître ces temps heureux où les peuples ne se mêlaient point de philosopher, mais où les Platon, les Thalès et les Pythagore, épris d’un ardent désir de savoir, entreprenaient les plus grands voyages *uniquement* pour s’instruire ...” (*Discours sur l’origine de l’inégalité*, note j; the italics are mine). Compare *Rêveries d’un promeneur solitaire*, III, p. 18, and VII, p. 72, Garnier ed.

³⁹ See the motto of the *Discours sur l’origine de l’inégalité*.

⁴⁰ “Il y a des préjugés qu’il faut respecter ... Mais lorsque tel est l’état des choses que plus rien ne saurait changer qu’en mieux, les préjugés sont-ils si respectables qu’il faille leur sacrifier la raison, la vertu, la justice, et tout le bien que la vérité pourrait faire aux hommes?” (*Lettre à Beaumont*, pp. 471–72, Garnier ed.). For another application of the same principle, see *Lettre à d’Alembert*, pp. 188–90, Fontaine ed. Compare Havens, pp. 45, 46, 54, and 229note 232. On Rousseau’s anticipation of a revolution, see Havens, pp. 38, 46, 50.

When Rousseau indicates toward the end of the *Discours* that “in the present state of things” he will not strive for literary fame or attempt to instruct the peoples in their duties he does not mean then that the incompatibility of science and society is due to “the present state of things,” but rather that he considers the present situation so hopeless that he cannot perform the social duty of the philosopher beyond what he has been doing in the *Discours*. The statement in question may also reflect a crisis in his self-confidence (see Havens, p. 226note 222). It was the success of the *Discours* that induced him to continue performing what he considered his social duty by writing the second *Discours*, the *Contrat social*, and *Émile*.

is shocked by the absurdity of philosophy having degenerated into a fashion or of the fight against prejudice having itself become a prejudice. If philosophy is identical with the liberation of one's mind from all prejudices, the degeneration of philosophy into a prejudice would destroy forever, humanly speaking, the possibility of intellectual freedom.⁴¹

III

Rousseau himself admitted that he did not reveal in the *Discours* the principles underlying that work.⁴² Since the purpose of the work is to warn the people against any contact with the sciences, it would of course have been impossible to stress there the superior dignity of science; to do this would have been tantamount to inviting the people to learning. In other words, since philosophy can become known on the market place only as popularized philosophy, a public attack on popularized philosophy inevitably becomes an attack on philosophy *tout court*. Rousseau then exaggerates in the *Discours* by attacking science as simply bad; he does this, however, not because he is carried away by irresponsible zeal or rhetoric, but because he is fully alive to the responsibilities that his principles impose upon him. In a public utterance on the incompatibility of science and society he had, according to his principles, to side flatly with society against science. This is not in contradiction with the fact that the *Discours* is ultimately addressed only to "the few," for every book is accessible, not merely to those to whom it is ultimately addressed, but to all who can read. Nor is our contention at variance with the circumstance that Rousseau revealed in his later writings certain points which he did not reveal in the *Discours*; for by failing to reveal in the later writings certain points which he had revealed in the *Discours*, he succeeded in never revealing his principles coherently and hence fully, – and thus in speaking through his publications merely to those whom he wanted to reach. It is only by combining the information supplied by the *Discours* with that supplied by Rousseau's later writings that one can arrive at an understanding of the principles underlying each and all of his writings. Whereas the *Discours* does not state clearly the precise qualification of his attack on science, it states more clearly than the later writings the decisive reason why science and society are incompatible.

The foregoing remarks do not agree with the fairly common opinion according to which Rousseau was absolutely frank – an opinion that derives apparently strong support from his protestations of his unbounded sincerity.⁴³ We

⁴¹ Compare the passages indicated in note 38 above, especially the beautiful passage in the preface: "Tel fait aujourd'hui l'esprit fort et le philosophe, qui, par la même raison n'eût été qu'un fanatique du temps de la ligue."

⁴² Compare Havens, 51 and 56. See also note 36 above.

⁴³ For example, near the beginning of the *Rêveries* he describes himself as follows: "Sans adresse, sans art, sans dissimulation, sans prudence, franc, ouvert, impatient, emporté ..."

have therefore to explain as clearly and as briefly as possible Rousseau's views regarding the duty of truthfulness.

Rousseau discusses this subject in the fourth "promenade" of the *Rêveries d'un promeneur solitaire*. The importance of the discussion may easily escape the unwary reader. In the first place, his habits will be confirmed by the artful character of the whole book, which claims to be written in a situation and in a mood in which considerations of prudence have ceased to carry any weight; it claims to be more outspoken even than the *Confessions* since it is said to be written exclusively for the author, who has no longer any thought or hope of reaching his readers. Moreover, the matter to which Rousseau applies his rule of conscience by way of expounding it is of the utmost triviality; he discusses at great length and in the spirit of unusual scrupulousness the question whether an author may pretend that his work is the translation of a Greek manuscript,⁴⁴ and also a number of minor falsehoods which it had been Rousseau's misfortune to utter. As for the rule itself, which he claims to have followed throughout his adult life, it can be reduced to the proposition that the obligation to speak the truth is founded exclusively on the utility of truth. From this it follows that one may not only suppress or disguise truths devoid of all possible utility, but may even be positively deceitful about them by asserting their contraries, without thus committing the sin of lying. Rousseau takes the trouble to add that the few lies he had uttered throughout his adult life were due to timidity or weakness.⁴⁵ It is perhaps more important to note that he limits himself to discussing only one kind of the truths that are devoid of all utility, namely, the merely useless truths: he does not say a word about the other kind which would have to be called dangerous truths. But we are entitled to infer from his general rule that he would have considered himself obliged to conceal dangerous truths and even to assert their contraries – assuming that there are such truths.

In the light of this conclusion, we can understand the specific contribution of the *Discours* to the exposition of Rousseau's principles. In the introduction he declares that he takes the side of truth. He does this by teaching the

⁴⁴ This question is a substitute for the somewhat more relevant question whether Rousseau was entitled to ascribe a certain profession of faith to a Catholic priest. That profession happens to be the central subject of the preceding "promenade."

⁴⁵ "... tant d'hommes et de philosophes, qui dans tous les temps ont médité sur ce sujet, ont tous unanimement rejeté la possibilité de la création (*sc.* de la matière), excepté peut-être un très petit nombre qui paraissent avoir sincèrement soumis leur raison à l'autorité; sincérité que les motifs de leur intérêt, de leur sûreté, de leur repos, rendent fort suspecte, et dont il sera toujours impossible de s'assurer tant que l'on risquera quelque chose à parler vrai" (*Lettre à Beaumont*, p. 461, Garnier ed.). In the same work Rousseau expresses the principle explained in the *Rêveries* as follows: "Pour moi, j'ai promis de dire [la vérité] en toute chose *utile*, autant qu'il serait en moi" (p. 472; italics mine), and "Parler au public avec franchise, avec fermeté, est un droit commun à tous les hommes, et même un devoir en toute chose *utile*" (p. 495 note; italics mine). Compare also the statement on the art of changing public opinion in the *Lettre à d'Alembert*, pp. 192 ff., Fontaine ed. Regarding the general question of Rousseau's "prudence," see Havens, pp. 165 note 8 and 177 note 48.

truth that science and society are incompatible. But this is a useful truth. The *Discours* is so far from siding with truth as such that it attacks science precisely because it is concerned with truth as such, regardless of its utility, and hence is not, by its intention, protected against the danger of leading to useless or even harmful truths. And Rousseau contends that all the secrets that nature hides from the people are so many evils against which she protects them; science accessible to the people would be like a dangerous weapon in the hands of a child.⁴⁶ The practical consequence that this assertion entails cannot be evaded by reference to Rousseau's contention that in times of extreme corruption no truth is any longer dangerous, for he wrote for posterity rather than for his own time. To say nothing of the fact that persecution was not precisely extinct in Rousseau's age.⁴⁷

In accordance with the general character of the *Discours* Rousseau maintains the thesis that the scientific or philosophic truth (the truth about the whole) is simply inaccessible rather than that it is inaccessible to the people. He asserts therefore the dangerous character of the quest for knowledge rather than that of knowledge acquired:⁴⁸ the quest for knowledge is dangerous because the truth is inaccessible and therefore the quest for truth leads to dangerous errors or to dangerous skepticism.⁴⁹ Science presupposes and fosters doubt; it forbids assent in all cases in which the truth is not evidently known, and it is at least possible that the truth about the most important subjects is not evidently known. But society requires that its members be sure regarding certain fundamentals. These certainties, "our dogmas," are not only not the acquisitions of science, but are essentially endangered by science: they become exposed to doubt because their lack of evidence is brought to light as soon as they are scientifically investigated. They are the objects not of knowledge but of faith. They, or the ends which they serve, are sacred.⁵⁰ It is the faith in the sacred foundations of society, or in that which makes them sacred, that Rousseau has in mind when praising ignorance: he praises ignorance accompanied by reverent assent. It is fundamentally distinguished from the ignorance, also praised

⁴⁶ *Discours*, 1, 9–11; 3, 2–5; 29, 11–30, 4; 33, 18–19; 34, 12–13; 36, 5–10; 55, 6–20; 56, 18–22. Compare *Lettre à d'Alembert*, p. 115 note, Fontaine ed.

⁴⁷ See p. 134 and note 45 above.

⁴⁸ The central thesis of the *Discours* is not affected by this incongruity since both contentions lead to the conclusion that quest for knowledge is dangerous to society.

⁴⁹ *Discours*, 11, 14–16; 29, 6–15; 33, 8–34; 60, 1–2.

⁵⁰ If the foundations of society are identical with the civil religion, and if the civil religion is identical with the religion of the Gospels, it follows that the suppression of all books with the exception of the Gospels, or at any rate of all scientific books, might be legitimate. It is the problem implied in the second conditional clause of the preceding sentence that Rousseau indicates by praising the Caliph Omar for having ordered the burning of the books of the library of Alexandria: "... supposez Grégoire le Grand à la place d'Omar et l'Évangile à la place de l'Alcoran, la Bibliothèque auroit encore été brûlée, et ce seroit peut-être le plus beau trait de la vie de cet illustre Pontife" (*Discours*, 60, 23–27). Compare *Acts*, 19: 17–20, and Havens, p. 46.

by him, which is accompanied by suspense of assent and which may be the ultimate result of the scientific effort. Following a lead given by Rousseau, we may distinguish the two kinds of ignorance as popular ignorance and Socratic ignorance; both kinds are opposed by him to the dogmatism of pseudoscience or of popularized science.⁵¹

Since Rousseau believed that genuine faith could only be the outcome of sound reasoning and would therefore be a privilege of the wise, it is preferable to say that according to him opinion rather than faith is the basis of society. In conformity with this position he indicates in the *Discours* that only genuine scholars are not subjugated by the opinions of their century, their country, or their society, whereas the majority of men necessarily are.⁵² We may therefore express the thesis of the *Discours* as follows: since the element of society is opinion, science, being the attempt to replace opinion by knowledge, essentially endangers society because it dissolves opinion. It is fundamentally for this reason, it would seem, that Rousseau considered science and society incompatible. Now, the view that the element of society is opinion becomes dangerous only if quest for knowledge is a human possibility and especially if it is the highest human possibility. Rousseau asserts therefore in the *Discours* that science is bad as such rather than that it is merely bad for society. By expressing the useful truth that he wants to convey in an exaggerated manner, he expresses it in a most reserved manner.

It is advisable to illustrate the reasoning underlying the *Discours* by a few more specific considerations, which are at least intimated in the same work. According to Rousseau, civil society is essentially a particular, or more precisely a closed, society. A civil society, he holds, can be healthy only if it has a character of its own, and this requires that its individuality be produced or fostered by national and exclusive institutions. Those institutions must be animated by a national "philosophy," by a way of thinking that is not transferable to other societies: "the philosophy of each people is little apt for another people." On the other hand, science or philosophy is essentially universal: it is common to all wise men. The diffusion of philosophy or science necessarily weakens the power of the national "philosophies" and therewith the attachment of the citizens to the particular way of life of their community. In other words, whereas science or philosophy is essentially cosmopolitan, society must

⁵¹ *Discours*, 36, 20–37, 4; 1, 8–9; 23, 18–24, 14; 34, 6–8; 34, 18–24; 55, 18–20. It should be noted that the true doctrine – namely, that science and society are incompatible – the exposition of which is the purpose of the *Discours*, is based not on faith but on reasoning (see concluding paragraph of Section I of this article).

⁵² *Lettres écrites de la Montagne*, III (see note 36 above). Compare note 30 above. See also the remark in the *Discours* (37, 6–7) that the popularizers of science are enemies of "l'opinion publique." While public opinion is the element and, in a sense, the standard of free society, it becomes questionable from a transpolitical point of view. Compare *Lettre à d'Alembert*, p. 192, Fontaine ed.: "opinion publique" is merely "opinion d'autrui." Compare *Discours*, 65, 18, and *Contrat social*, II 12 and IV 7.

be animated by the spirit of patriotism, a spirit which is by no means irreconcilable with national hatreds. Political society being essentially a society that has to defend itself against other states, it must foster the military virtues and it normally develops a warlike spirit. Philosophy, on the contrary, is destructive of the warlike spirit.⁵³

Furthermore, free society presupposes that its members have abandoned their original or natural liberty in favor of conventional liberty, that is, in favor of obedience to the laws of the community or to uniform rules of conduct to the making of which everyone can have contributed. Civil society requires conformance, or the transformation of man as a natural being into the citizen; compared with man's natural independence, all society is therefore a form of bondage. But philosophy demands that the philosopher follow his "own genius" with absolute sincerity, or without any regard to the general will or the communal way of thinking; in philosophizing, man asserts his natural freedom. Philosophy and society therefore necessarily come into conflict as soon as philosophy becomes a social factor.⁵⁴

Moreover, free society comes into being through the substitution of conventional equality for natural inequality. The pursuit of science, however, requires the cultivation of talents, that is, of natural inequality; its fostering of inequality is so characteristic that one may even wonder whether the concern with superiority, that is, desire for glory or pride, is not the root of science. Whatever might have to be said about political glory, it is less conspicuous than the glory attending on intellectual achievement – Sparta was less brilliant than Athens – and, above all, society, as such, having its roots in need cannot possibly have its roots in pride.⁵⁵

IV

To say that science and society are incompatible is one thing; to say that science and virtue are incompatible is another thing. The second thesis could be reduced to the first, if virtue were essentially political or social. There can be no doubt that Rousseau frequently identifies virtue with political virtue. Yet,

⁵³ In the *Discours* Rousseau states the case chiefly from the point of view of society (11, 12–14; 27, 15–17; 45, 10–49, 15) and therefore accepts "the military ideal of the Romans" (Havens, 206). But one cannot say that he does this "without criticism" (*ibid.*, 206); in *Discours*, 33, 2–3, he condemns wars as unmistakably as he condemns tyranny. Compare *Discours sur l'origine de l'inégalité*, note j; *Gouvernement de Pologne*, chs. 2 and 3; *Lettres écrites de la Montagne*, I, 131–33, Garnier ed.; *Contrat social*, II 8 (toward the end); and the first pages of *Émile*. See also Havens, p. 187 note 85.

⁵⁴ *Discours*, 5, 17–6, 2; 63, 3–11. Compare *Gouvernement de Pologne*, ch. 2; *Contrat social*, I 1, 6, and 8; and the first pages of *Émile*.

⁵⁵ *Discours*, 53, 6–12. Compare *ibid.*, 11, 14–16; 19, 10–11; 21, 17–18; 29, 8; 30, 8–17; 32, 12–13; 41, 1–2; 41, 11–14; 65, 8–11; 66, 11–14; Havens, pp. 211 note 172, 223 note 215, 226 note 222; *Contrat social*, I 9 (end) and II 1.

the mere fact that he sometimes attacks civil society, as such, in the name of virtue by praising the virtue of primitive man shows that he makes a distinction between political virtue and another kind of virtue.⁵⁶ This does not mean that his attack on science in the name of virtue, as such, is simply an exaggeration, for it is at least possible that the distinction between two kinds of virtue is only provisional. In his later writings Rousseau explicitly distinguishes between “goodness” and “virtue”: goodness belongs to man as a natural being, whereas virtue or morality belongs to man as a citizen, since it essentially presupposes the social contract or convention. The good man as distinguished from the virtuous man is only good for himself, because he is good only as long as he derives pleasure from being good or, more generally expressed, because he cannot do anything which he does not do with pleasure. A being is good to the extent to which he is self-sufficient, “solitary,” or not in need of others and hence absolutely happy. A man who is good and not virtuous is therefore unfit for society or for action. In the most important case he will be a *contemplatif solitaire* who finds in the joys and raptures of pure and disinterested contemplation – for example, the study of plants in the spirit of Theophrastus – perfect happiness and a godlike self-sufficiency. A man of this kind, that is, the philosopher, in so far as he is exclusively concerned with learning as distinguished from teaching, is a useless member of society because he is exclusively concerned with his own pleasures, and “every useless citizen may be regarded as a pernicious man.”⁵⁷

We note in passing that it is somewhat misleading to say that according to Rousseau virtue is an active quality, whereas goodness is merely passive. This description fits only one type of goodness, the goodness of the presocial or primitive man who is “a stupid animal.” It does not quite fit the goodness of the man who is good and at the same time wise. The latter’s not being active or

⁵⁶ Compare notes 10 and 21 above. *Discours*, 14, 1–15; 21, 17–21; 26, 5–28, 10. Compare 49, 18, with 50, 2–3 and 51, 3ff.; compare 8, 18–19 (“la vertu est la force et la vigueur de l’âme”) with 47, 9–15 and *Gouvernement de Pologne*, ch. 4 (“à cette vigueur d’âme, à ce zèle patriotique ...”). What Rousseau says about the incompatibility of science and political virtue must not be mistaken for, indeed it belongs to an entirely different level from, what he says about the incompatibility of the teaching of the Gospels, or of humanity in the sense of the Gospels, and patriotism. For the teaching of the Gospels is as much a teaching of duties as is the teaching of political society. The conflict between Christianity and political society is an intramoral conflict, whereas that between science and society is not.

⁵⁷ *Discours*, 35, 4–6; *Rêveries*, V–VII; *Contrat social*, I 8 and III 4; *Émile*, IV, vol. 1, p. 286, and V, vol. 2, pp. 274–75, Garnier ed. Compare note 38 above, as well as Havens, pp. 183note 74 and 172 note 32. “Wer wollte nicht dem im höchsten Sinne verehrten Johann Jakob Rousseau auf seinen einsamen Wanderungen folgen, wo er, mit dem Menschengeschlecht verfeindet, seine Aufmerksamkeit der Pflanzen- und Blumenwelt zuwendet und in echter grad sinniger Geisteskraft sich mit den stillreizenden Naturkindern vertraut macht” (Goethe, “Der Verfasser teilt die Geschichte seiner botanischen Studien mit,” in *Goethes morphologische Schriften*, selections by Troll, Jena 1926, p. 195). It does not seem that the importance of Rousseau’s *Rêveries* for Goethe’s work as a whole, and in particular for the *Faust*, is sufficiently appreciated.

even his being “idle” means that he has withdrawn from the hustle of the active life and devotes himself to solitary contemplation. In other words, one misunderstands Rousseau’s notion of natural goodness if one does not bear in mind the fact that it refers to two different types, who stand at the opposite poles of humanity (the primitive man and the wise) and who yet belong together as natural men, as self-sufficient beings, or “numerical units,” in contradistinction to an intermediate type, the citizen or social man, that is, the man who is bound by duties or obligations and who is only a “fractionary unit.”⁵⁸ It is the function of Rousseau’s autobiographical statements to present to the reader an example of, and an apology for, the natural or good man who is, or is becoming, wise without being virtuous.

To return to our argument, it is as a radically selfish pursuit of pleasure that Rousseau in his capacity as citizen of Geneva attacks philosophy or science at the beginning of his career, in the *Discours*.⁵⁹ At its end, in the *Rêveries*, he openly confesses that he himself has always been a useless member of society, that he has never been truly fit for civil society, and that he has found perfect happiness in the pleasure of solitary contemplation. In tacit reference to what he had indicated in the *Discours* about the connection between society and the needs of the body, he says in the *Rêveries* that nothing related to the interest of his body could ever truly occupy his soul. But even there, or rather precisely there, he feels obliged to excuse his life before the tribunal of society by explaining how the way of life which was really his own, and hence his happiness, had been forced upon him by his misfortunes: cut off from society by the malice of men, from pleasant dreams by the decline of his imagination, from thinking by the fear of thinking of his sufferings, he devoted himself to the sweet and simple pleasures of the study of botany.⁶⁰ Since he now admits that he himself, the citizen of Geneva, is, and always was, a useless citizen, he can no longer with propriety allow society to regard him as a pernicious man: whereas in the *Discours* he had said that “every useless citizen may be

⁵⁸ *Rêveries*, VIII, p. 80, Garnier ed., and VII, pp. 64 and 71; *Émile*, I, vol. 1, p. 13, Garnier ed. Compare Havens, p. 184 note 74. The notion connecting “natural man” with “wise man” is “genius” (compare *Discours*, 10, 1; 61, 20; 62, 13–14 and 19; 63, 5–11; Havens, p. 227 note 224). *Émile*, who is called a natural man, is an “esprit commun” or “homme vulgaire” (see pp. 129–30 of this article) who as a child comes as near to a natural man as a future citizen could come; that is to say, he is only an approximation to a natural man. Compare *Émile*, I, vol. 1, pp. 16 and 32. Compare Montesquieu, *De l’esprit des lois*, IV 8: “les sciences de speculation ... rendent [les hommes] sauvages.”

⁵⁹ A life devoted to science is irreconcilable with a life devoted to duty (33, 3–9); science as “agréable” is distinguished from what is “utile” or “salutaire” (54, 11–12; 56, 21–22; 53, 15–16; 5, 14–22; 36, 7–10); there is a necessary connection between science, on the one hand, idleness and luxury, on the other (37, 14–18; 34, 15–16; 36, 11–12). Compare *Lettre à d’Alembert*, pp. 120, 123, and 137, Fontaine ed.

⁶⁰ *Rêveries*, V–VII. Compare especially the remarks on the idleness of the *contemplatif solitaire* Rousseau (pp. 46, 64, and 71, Garnier ed.) with *Émile*, III (vol. 1, p. 248, Garnier ed.) where we read: “tout citoyen oisif est un fripon.” Compare *Rêveries*, VII, p. 68, with *Discours*, 5, 14 ff.

regarded as a pernicious man,” he says in the *Rêveries* that his contemporaries have done wrong, not in removing him from society as a useless member, but in proscribing him from society as a pernicious member. His last word on his central theme would then seem to be that science and citizenship are indeed irreconcilable, but that society can afford to tolerate a few good-for-nothings at its fringes, provided that they are really idle, that is, do not disturb society by subversive teachings – in other words, provided society does not take cognizance of them or does not take them seriously.⁶¹

V

Having reached this point we have still to face the greatest difficulty to which our attempt at a consistent understanding of Rousseau’s intention is exposed. How can the conclusion at which we have arrived be reconciled with Rousseau’s admission that science and virtue are compatible in superior minds or that they are incompatible only in “the peoples”? How can his admission that he was always a useless member of society, and in fact unfit for society or for a life of virtue and duty, be reconciled with his public spirit and sense of duty as evidenced by his political writings and by his conviction that the understanding reader of the “Profession de foi du vicaire Savoyard” would “bless a hundred times the virtuous and firm man who had dared to instruct mankind in this manner?”⁶² One may answer, indeed one must answer, that the natural antagonism between science and society, or between science and virtue, does not preclude the possibility that science and society may be brought into some kind of agreement by violence, that is, the possibility that the philosopher can be forced by society, or by himself as a citizen, to put his talents to the service of society⁶³ by teaching the peoples their duties while refraining from teaching them philosophy or science. But this answer is clearly insufficient. Rousseau did not limit himself to teaching the peoples their duties; he rather taught them their rights. His political teaching is not a popular or civil teaching; it is indubitably a philosophic or scientific teaching. His political teaching is a part of the whole edifice of philosophy or science, presupposing natural science and crowning it.⁶⁴ If society and science are incompatible, if science must not in any circumstances become a social factor, social science, which is intended to be a practical teaching, would seem to be impossible. How then is Rousseau’s own

⁶¹ This view is already indicated in the *Discours* (36, 11–16). Compare *ibid.*, 35, 2–6 with *Rêveries*, VI (end).

⁶² *Lettres écrites de la Montagne*, I, 124, Garnier ed. Compare note 40 above.

⁶³ Compare Plato’s statement of the problem in the *Republic*, 519, c4–520 b4, with *Discours*, 56, 1–11 and 57, 1–6.

⁶⁴ Regarding Rousseau’s view of the place and the character of political philosophy, see *Discours*, 3, 10–4, 3 (compare Havens’ notes) and the beginning of the preface to the *Discours sur l’origine de l’inégalité*.

political philosophy possible on the basis of his view of the relation of science and society?

Rousseau admits that in a corrupt society (such as the one in which he lived) only science, and even general enlightenment, can provide man with a measure of relief. In a society where it is no longer necessary or desirable that any prejudices be respected, one may freely discuss the sacred foundations of society and freely seek not merely for remedies of the prevailing abuses, but for what would be simply the best solution to the political problem.⁶⁵ Under such conditions, the direct and scientific presentation of that solution would at its worst be an innocent pastime; but assuming that there is a prospect of a revolution, the new political science might prepare public opinion not merely for the restoration of a healthy society, but for the establishment of a more perfect society than ever existed before.

From Rousseau's point of view the problem of society cannot be clearly seen and hence truly solved except on the basis of that radical criticism of society or of that fundamental reflection on the relation between society and science with which we have been hitherto concerned. The fundamental reflection reveals society as essentially a kind of bondage; the antagonism between science and society is the most important example of the antagonism between natural liberty and man-made bondage. The natural independence of man over against society determines the general character of the best solution to the political problem: the best solution is a society in which man remains as free as possible.

To discover the precise solution, Rousseau proceeds as follows. Like Hobbes and Locke, he finds the sufficient natural basis of society in everyone's natural desire for self-preservation. As soon as man's faculties have developed beyond a certain point he is unable to preserve himself without the aid of others. The foundations of society are then really not more than the needs of the body, the selfish and most pressing needs of each individual. It is these needs that immediately motivate the concern with freedom: no superior can be presumed to have the same interest in the individual's self-preservation as the individual himself. To enjoy the advantages of society everyone must accept its burdens; everyone must submit his own will, which is directed toward his own good, to the general will, which is directed toward the common good. Freedom in society is possible only within these limits. Man is free in the political sense if he is subject only to the impersonal will of society, and not to the personal or private will of any other individual or group of individuals. To avoid any kind of personal dependence or any kind of "private government," everyone and everything must be subjected to the social will, which expresses itself only

⁶⁵ Compare p. 132 of this article. Rousseau's thesis is a modification of the more common view according to which private men are not allowed to dispute what would be the best political order for the society to which they belong. Compare Calvin, *Institutio*, IV 20 §8 (vol. 2, 521, Tholuck ed.), and Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ch. 42 (299, Everyman's Library ed.).

in the form of general laws to the establishment of which everyone must have been able to contribute by his vote. Rousseau knew very well that “the total alienation of each associate with all his rights to the whole community,” or the complete submission of the private will to the general will, in order to be reasonable or legitimate requires that a number of conditions be fulfilled which rarely are fulfilled. The real difficulty to which his doctrine of the general will is exposed, the difficulty to which it is exposed on the level of the question it is meant to answer, is expressed by these two questions: How can the general will which is always well intentioned since it is always directed toward the good of society, be presumed to be always enlightened about the good of society? And how can the transformation of natural man, who is guided exclusively by his private will, into the citizen, who unhesitatingly prefers the general will to his private will, be effected?⁶⁶

Now, according to Rousseau, this problem can only be stated by political philosophy; it cannot be solved by it; or, more precisely, its solution is endangered by the very political philosophy that leads up to it. For its solution is the action of the legislator or of the “father” of a nation, that is, of a man of superior intelligence who by ascribing divine origin to a code which he has devised, or by honoring the gods with his own wisdom, induces the citizen body to submit freely to his code. This action of the legislator is necessarily endangered by philosophy, since the arguments by which the legislator has to convince the citizens of his divine mission, or of the divine sanction for his laws, are necessarily of doubtful solidity.⁶⁷ One might think that once the code were ratified, a “social spirit” developed, and the wise legislation accepted on account of its proved wisdom rather than its pretended origin, the belief in the divine origin of the code would no longer be required; but this suggestion overlooks the fact that the living respect for old laws, “the prejudice of antiquity,” which is indispensable for the health of society, can only with difficulty survive the public “debunking” of the accounts regarding their origin. In other words, the transformation of natural man into the citizen is a problem coeval with society itself, and therefore society has a continuous need for at least an equivalent for the mysterious and awe-inspiring action of the legislator. The legislator’s action, as well as its later equivalents (traditions and sentiments), serve the purpose of “substituting a partial and moral existence for the physical and independent existence which we have received from nature.” Only if the opinions or sentiments engendered by society overcome, and as it were annihilate, the natural sentiments, can there be a stable and healthy society.⁶⁸ That

⁶⁶ “Les particuliers voient le bien [sc. public] qu’ils rejettent; le public veut le bien qu’il ne voit pas ... Voilà d’où naît la nécessité du législateur (*Contrat social*, II 6).

⁶⁷ Compare in this connection Rousseau’s discussion of the problem of miracles in the *Lettres écrites de la Montagne*, II–III.

⁶⁸ *Contrat social*, II 6 and 7; III 2 and 11. In the chapter on the legislator (II 7) Rousseau clearly refers only to Moses and Mohammed as examples of legislators; but he clarifies his position

is to say: society has to do everything possible to make the citizens oblivious of the very facts that are brought to the center of their attention, as the foundations of society, by political philosophy. Society stands or falls by a specific obfuscation against which philosophy necessarily revolts. The problem posed by political philosophy must be forgotten, if the solution to which political philosophy leads shall work.

This intelligible, if uncomfortable, position could satisfy Rousseau who had the “well-contrived head for which doubt is a good cushion.” The easiest way out of this predicament, the way that “the next generation” could not help choosing, was to accept his final and practical solution (his “rediscovery of the community,” his notion of the general will, the primacy of conscience or of sentiment and tradition) and to throw overboard, or to forget, his theoretical premise (“the state of nature,” the independent individual, the primacy of theoretical reason). The simplest solution of Rousseau’s problem is the “romantic” solution. It may be said to be a genuine solution since it consists precisely in doing what Rousseau himself demanded for the era following the establishment, or restoration, of a true society – namely, in forgetting the “individualistic” premise and keeping all one’s thoughts and wishes within the compass of man’s social life. The price, which has to be paid for it, is, directly or indirectly, the subordination of philosophy to society, or the integration of philosophy into “culture.”

It is true of course that Rousseau’s doctrine of the legislator is meant to clarify the fundamental problem of society rather than to suggest a practical solution for modern Europe, except insofar as that doctrine adumbrates Rousseau’s own function. The precise reason why he had to go beyond the classical notion of the legislator was that that notion is apt to obscure the sovereignty of the people, that is, to lead, for all practical purposes, to the substitution of the supremacy of the law for the full sovereignty of the people. The classical notion of the legislator is irreconcilable with the demand, so strongly made by Rousseau, for periodic appeals from the whole legal and constitutional order to the sovereign will of the people, or from the will of past generations to the will of the living generation.⁶⁹ Rousseau had, therefore, to find a substitute for the action of the legislator, a substitute that would be compatible with the highest possible degree of freedom of the people. According to his final suggestion, the most fundamental function originally

sufficiently by quoting in one footnote a passage from Machiavelli’s *Discorsi* and by praising in another footnote the theologian Calvin (the legislator of Geneva) as a statesman of the first order. Compare Plato, *Laws*, 634 d7–e4 (757 d–e and 875 a1–d5), and Aristotle, *Politics*, 1269 a15 ff. (also *Metaphysics*, 995 a3–6 and 1074 b1–14).

⁶⁹ *Contrat social*, III 18. (For the interpretation consider Paine, *Rights of Man*, pp. 12ff., Everyman’s Library ed.). Compare *The Federalist*, ed. by E. M. Earle (Washington: National Home Library Foundation) no. 49, pp. 328–39: frequent appeals to the people prevent opinion, or the prejudices of the community, from acquiring the necessary strength.

entrusted to the legislator,⁷⁰ namely, the transformation of natural man into the citizen, has to be discharged by a civil religion of the kind described from somewhat different points of view in the *Contrat social*, on the one hand, and in *Émile*, on the other. We need not go into the question whether Rousseau himself believed in the religion he presented in the profession of faith of the Savoyard vicar, a question that cannot be answered by reference to what he said when he was persecuted on account of that profession. What is decisive is the fact that according to his explicit view of the relation of knowledge, faith, and “the people,” the citizen body cannot have more than opinion regarding the truth of this or any other religion. One may even wonder whether any human being can have genuine knowledge in this respect since, according to Rousseau’s last word on the subject, there are “insoluble objections” to the religion preached by the Savoyard vicar.⁷¹ Therefore every civil religion would seem to have, in the last analysis, the same character as the legislator’s account of the origin of his code, in so far as both are essentially endangered by the “dangerous pyrrhonism” fostered by the rigorous demands of philosophy or science: the “insoluble objections,” to which even the best of all religions is exposed, are dangerous truths. Rousseau’s personal horror, and impatience, of intolerance is primarily responsible for the fact that he did not dwell in his writings subsequent to the *Discours* on the consequences that this view entails.

VI

Rousseau maintained then, to the last, the thesis that he had set forth most impressively at the beginning of his career. That thesis, to repeat, is to the effect that there is a fundamental disproportion between the requirements of society and those of philosophy or science. It is opposed to the thesis of the Enlightenment, according to which the diffusion of philosophic or scientific knowledge is unqualifiedly salutary to society, or more generally expressed, there is a natural harmony between the requirements of society and those of science. One can trace Rousseau’s thesis directly to Descartes’ distinction between

⁷⁰ Regarding the other problem that the legislator has to solve, namely, the enlightening of the general will about its objects, Rousseau seems to have believed that not its solution, but indeed a prerequisite for its solution in a complex society is supplied by a political system that favors the wealthy and the rural population over against *la canaille*. This political demand transforms the egalitarian implication of his doctrine of the general will into something comparable to the “sophisms” of classical politics. (Compare Aristotle, *Politics*, 1297 a14 ff., and Xenophon, *Cyropaedia*, I 2.15.) That Rousseau was aware of this can be seen from what he says in approving the constitutional changes effected by Servius Tullius (*Contrat social*, IV 4; compare *ibid.*, III 15).

⁷¹ *Rêveries*, III, pp. 23 and 27, Garnier ed.; *Lettre à Beaumont*, p. 479, Garnier ed.; *Lettres écrites de la Montagne*, I, pp. 121–36, Garnier ed., and IV, pp. 180. Compare notes 36 and 45 above. For the question of “insoluble objections,” compare Leibniz, *Théodicée*, Discours préliminaire, 24–27.

the rules regarding the reform of one's own thoughts and those regarding the reform of society.⁷² But considering the facts that Descartes' relation to the Enlightenment is ambiguous as well as that Rousseau attacks modern politics in the name of classical politics, it is preferable to understand Rousseau's thesis as a restatement of the view underlying classical political philosophy, and his attack on the thesis of the Enlightenment as a part, although the most important part, of his attack on modern politics in the name of classical politics.⁷³ It may therefore be permissible to conclude our essay on Rousseau's intention with a cursory consideration of the relation of his political philosophy to classical political philosophy.

For the proper understanding of that relation, one must disregard the accidental difference, which is due to the difference in the social status of philosophy in the classical period, on the one hand, and in that of Rousseau, on the other. The classical statements about science and society, especially those of Plato, still had to serve the purpose of combating a common prejudice against philosophy, whereas Rousseau had to fight perhaps an even more dangerous prejudice in favor of philosophy: by his time, philosophy had become not merely a generally revered tradition, but a fashion. In order to grasp the essential difference, it is advisable to start as follows. The basic premise of classical political philosophy may be said to be the view that the natural inequality of intellectual powers is, or ought to be, of decisive political importance. Hence the unlimited rule of the wise, in no way answerable to the subjects, appears to be the absolutely best solution to the political problem. This demand is obviously irreconcilable for all practical purposes with the character of the political community. The disproportion between the requirements of science and those of society leads to the consequence that the true or natural order (the absolute rule of the wise over the unwise) must be replaced by its political counterpart or imitation, which is the rule, under law, of the gentlemen over those who are not gentlemen.

The difficulties to which this doctrine as a whole is exposed have tempted political thinkers from very early times to take the natural equality of all men as a starting point for their reflections. These attempts gained considerably in significance when the natural character of the inequality of intellectual capacities was explicitly questioned, and therewith the stronghold of the classical position was attacked as a consequence of the emergence of a heightened belief in the virtue of method as distinguished from natural gifts. It is this radical change that led to the Enlightenment attacked by Rousseau. In opposition to

⁷² *Discours de la méthode*, II–III. Descartes is mentioned in the *Discours* twice (34, 19 and 62, 15). Compare also *ibid.*, 63, 6 (“marcher seuls”) with *Discours de la méthode*, II (Adam-Tannéy 16, 30).

⁷³ Regarding Rousseau's relation to classical politics, compare the passages indicated or quoted in notes 5, 11, 12, 20, 22, 35, 39, 63, and 68 above. Compare the explicit reference to Plato's *Republic* in *Discours*, 41 note, and to the *Laws*, *ibid.*, 19 note.

the Enlightenment he reasserts the crucial importance of the natural inequality of men with regard to intellectual gifts.⁷⁴ But he avoids the political consequences that the classics drew from this principle, by appealing to another classical principle, namely, the disproportion between the requirements of science and those of society: he denies that the conclusion from the fact of natural inequality to the demand for political inequality is valid. The disproportion between the requirements of science and those of society permits him to build a fundamentally egalitarian politics on the admission, and even the emphatic assertion, of the natural inequality of men in the most important respect. One is tempted to say that Rousseau was the first to meet Plato's and Aristotle's challenge to democracy on the level of Plato's and Aristotle's reflections, and that it is this fact that accounts for his unique position in the history of democratic doctrine.

It goes without saying that the relation between Rousseau and the classics is not exhausted by that part of the discussion which is carried on by Rousseau on the level of classical political philosophy. Rousseau makes a radical departure from classical political philosophy by accepting the principle of Machiavelli's criticism of classical political philosophy and by building his doctrine on modern natural science. He is thus led to replace the classical definition of man as the rational animal by the definition of man as a free agent, or the idea of human perfection by that of human perfectibility, to exaggerate the distinction between political virtue and genuine virtue into the opposition between virtue and goodness, and, last but not least, to initiate the fateful combination of the lowering of the moral standards with the moral pathos of "sincerity." All the serious difficulties with which the understanding of Rousseau's teaching remains beset, even if the principle suggested in the present article is accepted, can be traced to the fact that he tried to preserve the classical idea of philosophy on the basis of modern science. Only in a few cases is there any need for recourse to his private idiosyncrasies to clear up apparent or real contradictions in his teaching. In particular, I do not wish to deny that on a few occasions his irritable *amour-propre* may have blurred his amazingly lucid vision.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Compare *Discours*, 61, 20; 62, 13-14 and 19; 63, 5-11; compare also the end of the *Discours sur l'origine de l'inégalité* as well as *Contrat social*, I 9 and II 1.

⁷⁵ Compare *Discours*, 29, 1-5.